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ABSTRACT

A study identified the homophones most commonly used in children's writing and showed how the relative use of specific homophones changes as writing skill develops. Homophones appearing in Rinsland's "A Basic Vocabulary of Elementary School Children," a vocabulary list compiled from a national sample of children's writing in grades 2 through 8, were identified by cross-matching with two extensive homophone lists. This procedure resulted in 217 homophone units consisting of 451 words. A tabulation of the grade-level frequency of each homophone was made, resulting in 49 "common" homophones--those occurring 10 or more times at 5 different grade levels. The remaining homophones were then placed in rank order. Since students in the higher grade levels provided more running words for the Rinsland study than did those in lower grades, the resulting composite was somewhat biased in the direction of older writers, but indicated that certain homophones were dominant at every grade level. Two homophone units--"there/their" and "to/two/too"--exhibit the greatest utility at every grade level. An important implication of these findings is that many homophone units generally considered the province of primary grade instruction should be reviewed and practiced throughout elementary school spelling instruction. (HTH)

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RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF HOMOPHONES IN CHILDREN'S WRITING

Larry Gentry

ABSTRACT

The relative frequency of homophones in children's writing is examined. A composite listing of the most commonly used homophones in Grades 2-8 is provided, as are listings of the most common homophones at selected grade levels.

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Larry Gentry

Studies of children's spelling errors indicate that the correct spelling of homophones (words with the same pronunciation, but different meanings and spellings) is a difficult task for many students.

Johnson (1950) listed 28 homophones among the 100 words most frequently misspelled by students in Grades 3-8, and seven among the first twelve (i.e., their, too, there, our, through, you're, clothes). Fitzgerald (1952) found similar results in his study of misspellings in Grades 2-6, with 26 homophones among the 100 most difficult words.

Although most spelling texts devote some attention to instruction in homophones, there are considerable differences between programs in the specific homophones selected for instruction. In an examination of seven elementary spelling series, the author found no homophones common to all seven, and only two pair common to six series. Some homophones that are infrequently used in children's writing (e.g., heal/heel, toe/tow) appeared in the majority of series, while some frequently used homophones (e.g., for/four, its/it's) appeared in only one or two (Gentry, 1980).

The present study identifies the homophones most commonly used in children's writing in Grades 2-8 and shows how the relative use of specific homophones changes as writing skill develops. Such data should prove useful in designing appropriate homophone instruction for students.

The study is based on the homophone units (groups of two or more homophones) appearing in Rinsland's A Basic Vocabulary of Elementary School Children (1945). The Rinsland list, compiled from a national sample of children's writing in Grades 2-8 (and oral vocabulary at Grade 1), contains 14,571 words that were used three or more times in some six million running words.

Homophones appearing in the Rinsland list were identified by cross-matching the Rinsland vocabulary with the extensive lists of homophones compiled by Whitford (1966) and Cronnell (1970). This procedure extracted 217 homophone units consisting of 451 words.

A tabulation was made of the grade-level frequency of each homophone occurring in Grades 2-8. "Common" homophones were defined as those in which at least two members of a homophone unit occurred ten or more times at five different grade levels. A total of 49 homophone units met this criterion.

These remaining homophone units were then placed in rank order from most common to least common by listing each individual homophone by number of occurrences. The highest rank was assigned to the homophone unit in which the "weaker" (least frequent) member of a pair occurs more frequently than the weaker members of other pairs. For example, although the word I is the most frequently used member of any homophone unit, its homophonous correspondent, the word eye, is relatively infrequent. The I/eye unit thus ranks behind those units in which both members of a unit occur more frequently (e.g., there/their).

By applying these procedures to the total occurrences of 49 homophone units in Grades 2-8, the rank order shown in Table 1 was established.

Table 1

Composite Rank Order of Homophones in Grades 2-8

1.	there/their	26.	we'll/wheel**
2.	to/two/too	27.	piece/peace
3.	know/no	28.	blue/blew
4.	write/right	29.	be/bee
5.	for/four	30.	nose/knows
6.	here/hear	31.	flower/flour
7.	by/buy	32.	merry/marry***
8.	its/it's	33.	fourth/forth
9.	new/knew	34.	your/you're
10.	would/wood	35.	seen/scene
11.	ate/eight	36.	wait/weight
12.	our/hour*	37.	sail/sale
13.	see/sea	38.	plane/plain
14.	road/rode	39.	sent/cent
15.	where/wear**	40.	way/weigh
16.	one/won	41.	aunt/ant***
17.	hole/whole	42.	week/weak
18.	through/threw	43.	which/witch**
19.	meat/meet	44.	made/maid
20.	dear/deer	45.	rose/rows
21.	sun/son	46.	axe/acts****
22.	passed/past	47.	bear/bare
23.	weather/whether**	48.	heard/herd
24.	I/eye	49.	capital/capitol
25.	so/sew		

*Our and hour are homophones when our is in a stressed position in a sentence. When our is unstressed, it is homophonous with are.

**These words are homophones only for those speakers who do not distinguish between /w/ and /hw/.

***Some English speakers distinguish between the vowel sounds in merry and marry, and/or aunt and ant.

****Most English speakers do not pronounce the t in acts.

As a composite listing, Table 1 reveals those homophone units that are most useful across grade levels. Since students in the higher grade levels provided more running words for the Rinsland study than those in lower grades, it is somewhat biased in the direction of older writers. It is revealing to note, however, that certain homophones are dominant at every grade level. Two homophone units, there/their and to/two/too, exhibit the greatest util'ty at every grade level. Certain other units vary slightly in their utility from grade to grade, but maintain a high degree of usefulness throughout the elementary years. An example of this stability is seen in Table 2, a listing of the 15 most common homophone units in Grades 2, 5, and 8. Ten homophones are common to all three lists; these ten are among the first eleven in the composite ranking.

In both tables, the more frequent member of a homophone unit (or most frequent in some cases) is listed first (e.g., in there/their, there occurs more often than their). As Table 2 shows, this "stronger/weaker" relationship remains the same across grade levels for most homophones. In a few instances, however, changes in relative strength do occur. For example, while no is more frequent than know at Grade 2 (indicated as no/know), the reverse is true at Grades 5 and 8 (indicated as know/no). Other units that exhibit reversals in relative strength include too/two, its/it's, and rode/road.

An important implication of these findings is that many homophone units that are generally considered the province of primary-grade instruction should be reviewed and practiced throughout elementary school spelling instruction. This view is reinforced by Furness and Boyd's

Table 2

Rank Order of Homophones at Selected Grade Levels

Grade 2	Grade 5
1. to/too/two	1. to/too/two
2. there/their	2. there/their
3. for/four	3. know/no
4. no/know	4. write/right
5. write/right	5. here/hear
6. by/buy	6. for/four
7. where/wear	7. by/buy
8. ate/eight	8. new/knew
9. dear/deer	9. would/wood
10. here/hear	10. one/won
11. would/wood	11. ate/eight
12. be/bee	12. it's/its
13. its/it's	13. through/threw
14. rode/road	14. our/hour
15. meat/meet	15. whole/hole

Grade 8

1. there/their
2. to/two/too
3. know/no
4. write/right
5. for/four
6. new/knew
7. our/hour
8. see/sea
9. its/it's
10. ate/eight
11. here/hear
12. would/wood
13. by/buy
14. road/rode
15. one/won

study of high school spelling (1958); the homophones their, there, they're, to, too, two, its, and it's, all prominently mentioned in the preceding tables, were all found in their list of "real demons" for high school writers.

Since spelling books differ widely in their treatment of homophones, it is important for teachers to be aware of the instructional needs of their students and to provide exposure and practice with the homophones that they need in everyday writing.

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